

South Carolina Prisons Get a “Fresh Start” With Tobacco-Free Policy

Issue

When John Ozmint became director of the S.C. Department of Corrections in January 2003, he decided to make health a priority in the prison system. That is not always an easy task when an agency has almost 6,000 employees, 23,000 inmates and operates 28 institutions. However, after the prison system lost a 2005 lawsuit to an asthmatic man who claimed his rights were violated when he was exposed to secondhand cigarette smoke, Ozmint decided it was time to implement a policy that would make the S.C. Department of Corrections a tobacco-free agency.

While tobacco use rates among the state’s incarcerated population have not been collected, 21.9 percent of S.C. adults are current smokers according to the 2007 South Carolina Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System. Secondhand smoke exposure kills up to 1,120 non-smokers in South Carolina annually. One way to protect against exposure and encourage people to quit tobacco use is to adopt policies such as the one Ozmint proposed for his agency. However, for a tobacco-free policy to truly work, it should include resources to help people quit smoking, according to tobacco control best practice guidelines.

Intervention

The Department of Corrections recognized that in order to have a successful transition to a tobacco-free agency, it would need to offer tobacco cessation to employees and inmates in addition to the currently available nicotine replacement therapy. The S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control’s Region 3 staff in June 2007 began working with the Department of Corrections to prepare for its tobacco-free policy and offer cessation resources to employees and inmates. Preventive Health Block Grant funded Region 3 staff offered training in the American Cancer Society’s Fresh Start program. The intervention included:

- A three-hour training for 39 facilitators at three Columbia facilities that were piloting the tobacco-free policy. The tobacco-free policy went into effect on Aug 1, 2007 in five facilities including Broad River Correctional and Kirkland Reception and Evaluation Center in Columbia. Ozmint began implementation early at these locations because he wanted to test smoking cessation programs that include a 30-day stop-smoking program for employees. Prisoners were allowed to buy lozenges to curb their craving for nicotine;
- An additional Fresh Start training for 10 S.C. Probation, Pardon, & Parole (PPP) staff, who became certified facilitators; and
- Providing employees with promotional materials for the free S.C. Tobacco Quitline.

Impact

After the Aug. 1, 2007 implementation at select correctional facilities, few problems were reported. On Jan. 1, 2008, the entire Department of Corrections went tobacco-free protecting more than 30,000 employees and inmates from exposure to secondhand smoke. While the state lost revenue from prison cigarette sales when the policy went into effect, Ozmint said the health of employees and inmates was what mattered. “You feel dirty for putting off a decision you know is right just because you’re making \$600,000 to \$800,000 a year,” Ozmint said. This tobacco policy put the state’s Department of Corrections in line with federal prisons, which are already tobacco-free.

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